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SUBJECT: TURKEY: WALKING BACK THE GAZA RHETORIC

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Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Erdogan has begun to modify his politically charged Gaza rhetoric, responding to growing concerns in the Turkish Jewish community, moderate Arab capitals, American Jewish groups, and among GOT officials. Since Davos, Erdogan has repeatedly emphasized that his statements are directed at the GOI, and not Israeli citizens or Jews. President Gul, FM Babacan, and GOT Spokesman Cicek have repeated his message. Taking actions to address Turkish Jewish Community concerns about growing anti-Semitism, Diyanet President Bardakoglu instructed his staff to prepare a February 6 sermon to be delivered at mosques throughout the country, emphasizing respect for all citizens. The Jewish community remains leery of the effect recent actions will have on reducing what they and other human rights groups view to be a persistent increase in tensions against Jews. Nevertheless, Erdogan's change in tone reflects a cognizant understanding of the impact of his rhetoric and a decision to walk back some of his more inflammatory statements. End summary.

GOT's Pre-Davos Overtures

12. (C) Prior to the Davos fallout, GOT leaders had already begun efforts to reconcile Erdogan's Gaza rhetoric (ref A). During a January 12 press conference, GOT Spokesman and Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Cicek underscored that Ankara was not considering any retaliatory actions against Israel, including suspending military or diplomatic ties. He added, "While there have been ups and downs in the political relationship...ties are not to be affected because of the depth of the relationship, which serves Turkey's strategic interest." Speaking to a more international audience, FM Babacan repeated the message at the January 26 European Union Foreign Ministers meeting in Brussels. Babacan reportedly called upon Hamas to use peaceful means to achieve its aims rather than an armed struggle. He noted that while its role cannot be denied, "Hamas has made mistakes that we do not approve of." Nevertheless, both Cicek and Babacan were careful to state that Turkey has not changed its policy, specifically emphasizing that Hamas should be included in the political process. Babacan has repeatedly reiterated PM Erdogan's statement that anti-Semitism is a crime against humanity. Retired Ambassador to the U.S. and former director of the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM) Faruk

Logoglu commented to us that Babacan's actions in Brussels greatly reflected the MFA bureaucracy's attempt to try to walk back PM Erdogan's destructive statements.

GOT Addresses Charges of Anti-Semitism

¶ 13. (U) Upon returning from Davos, Erdogan defended his actions, but was careful to draw a distinction between criticizing Peres and the Israeli government's actions versus the Jewish people. He told an Istanbul audience January 30 that his statements in Davos were made to protect the honor of the Turkish Republic, noting that, "those who have always been scared of their own shadows may find it difficult to understand." He rebuffed charges that the GOT had inflamed anti-Semitic sentiment. Erdogan clarified that the GOT had criticized the Israeli administration's practices in Gaza but had never directed his rhetoric toward the Israeli people or Jews in general.

¶ 14. (U) In his February 3 address to AKP's parliamentary group, Erdogan laid blame on the debate moderator David Ignatius for refusing to grant Erdogan sufficient time to respond to Peres and for "putting his hand on the shoulder of a prime minister." Erdogan said it was incorrect to interpret Turkey's criticism of Israel's military offensive into Gaza as anti-Semitic, adding, "There has never been anti-Semitism in the history of this country. The people have never seen the Jews as enemies. I believe we will not see such attitudes in the future." Turkey had been

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highlighting the "human tragedy" in Gaza, and "being a mediator between the two countries does not prevent us from speaking the truth." Following the meeting, GOT Spokesman Cemil Cicek reiterated to reporters that Turkey attaches great significance to bilateral relations with Israel. Despite the "ungrounded and biased" assessment about Turkey-Israel relations following Erdogan's walkout in Davos, the Turkish government wants to protest its ties with Israel.

¶ 15. (U) President Gul assumed a more tempered tone than the PM's throughout the Gaza crisis, causing some media to speculate about a rift between Gul and Erdogan over the issue. While publicly calling on the GOI to halt its actions in Gaza, Gul stressed the negative impact of the events on regional stability. He also telephoned an Istanbul Jewish Community leader to convey his concern and support in response to reports of anti-Semitism. On February 3, Gul repeated his call for tolerance at an Istanbul press conference en route to Saudi Arabia. He stated, "Turkish Jews are equal citizens of Turkey. They can be elected lawmakers and president." He warned the public not to turn the criticism of Israeli policy into an anti-Semitic campaign, stating, "Do not discriminate. Everyone has equal rights." Gul also defended Turkey's policy of recognizing Hamas as a legitimate interlocutor. "Hamas must be involved in the political process. Some say this openly and some during our private meetings. Turkey has acted responsibly from the very beginning, meeting with Hamas only after they won 2006 elections, and warning them about the consequences of taking the wrong path."

¶ 16. (SBU) The GOT is also taking steps to manage the message at the community level. Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) Vice President Mehmet Gormez told us February 4 that Diyanet President Ali Bardakoglu called Istanbul Jewish Community President Silvio Ovayda to reassure him that he will take the actions necessary to prevent public emotions over the Gaza crisis from morphing into actions directed against Jews. Gormez said the Diyanet has prepared a February 6 sermon to be delivered throughout Turkey, urging people to act with "common sense" and respect for all persons. Istanbul Mufti Cagrici reportedly directed all sub-provincial muftis, imams, and preachers not to say "a

single word that would agitate the society."

Opposition: Erdogan Playing Politics

¶ 17. (U) CHP leader Deniz Baykal told his parliamentary group that Erdogan had orchestrated the Davos walk-out for domestic political ends. Baykal criticized the government's attempts to mediate, stating, "Turkey cannot obtain a benefit by adopting a pro-Hamas stance. Turkey should not take sides or enter into a conflict with Israel." MHP leader Devlet Bahceli, in a February 3 closed parliamentary group session, reportedly told his deputies that Erdogan was using the Davos incident as a tool to attract more votes in local elections. "It seems Erdogan played the victim and exploited the public's feelings for gain."

Liberals Fear More Than Anti-Semitism

¶ 18. (C) Human Rights attorney Orhan Kemal Cengiz told us that the problem is less an attitude of outright anti-Semitism than "a Turkish mentality that can be very racist without realizing it." PM Erdogan's remarks had been political blustering but the Turkish press, in particular Islamist-leaning "Vakit" and "Zaman" had been running headlines, photos, and stories that brought to the fore Turks' intolerance. Cengiz, the lead attorney for the victims' families in the Malatya murders trial, told us he has seen very similar attacks against Turkish Christians, and a persistent bias against Christians and other non-Turks. He believes the Turkish leadership made "correct" statements following the Malatya murders, the Hrant Dink murder, and following Davos. However, the GOT failed to follow through by taking tangible steps such as attending a funeral for any of the Malatya victims, attending the Dink funeral, or visiting the Jewish Community or a synagogue to condemn

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recent anti-Semitic incidents.

¶ 19. (C) Professor Baskin Oran told us January 30 that Erdogan's walk out and continuing rhetoric "did not serve Turkey well" because they are fueling hostility against all non-Muslims. Oran contended that this anti-Muslim sentiment has its roots in the Ottoman "millet system," by which non-Muslims were treated as second-class citizens. Oran stressed that the military and Turkish state were the most culpable throughout Turkish history in stoking antipathy toward Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Jews, and other non-Muslims.

Comment

¶ 10. (C) Astutely positioning his party for March local elections, PM Erdogan was quick to accept the hero's welcome and popular boost he received upon returning from Davos. However, facing mounting concern from the GOI, moderate Arab capitals, the American Jewish community, and his own GOT officials, who had already started the daunting task of whitewashing Erdogan's politically charged rhetoric prior to Davos, the PM appears to have gotten the message. He has tempered his comments and carefully clarifying that his criticisms were directed at the Israeli government and not its citizens or Jews. The Jewish Community remains leery that the GOT's remarks are mere window-dressing. Community officials report that no local political leaders have stepped forward to condemn anti-Semitic acts, while public prosecutors ignore legal provisions that would allow them to investigate and prosecute anti-Semitic statements. Clearly the GOT needs to be more cognizant about how its actions (or lack thereof) and messages reverberate among Turkish society. The Diyanet's actions are a positive step toward trying to

generate an attitude change where it counts: on the streets and at the local level.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

Jeffrey